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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

THE PLAYBOY OF CRITICISM¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

“AND now when the Great Moon had come, Steeplejack touched the tip of the spire, where instead of a cross he found a vane which swung as the wind listeth; thereat he marvelled and rejoiced. ‘Behold!’ he cried, ‘thou glowing symbol of the New Man. A weathercock and a mighty twirling. This then shall be the sign set in the sky for Immoralists: A cool brain and a wicked heart. Nothing is true. All is permitted, for all is necessary.’—Thus Spake Steeplejack.”

Such is the motto chosen by James Huneker to introduce his Autobiography, the last of that remarkable series of books which are now all that remains of him—save those of his writings which may be found in the newspaper files of the last quarter-century. For Steeplejack is dead, and an important chapter in the history of letters in America is closed. Mr. Huneker, in a quite definite and literal sense, began and ended a significant period in the aesthetic life of this country. He had scarcely a precursor; he was unique while he lived; and he has no successor.

Mr. Huneker’s pilgrimage among the Seven Arts which he loved to patronize and expound began in the Philadelphia of 1860; it ended in Flatbush a few weeks ago. Drab outposts, it would seem; yet what a glittering web of experience and projection is hung between them! H. L. Mencken has said of Mr. Huneker that he “created civilized taste in America.” There is a large infusion of truth in that somewhat too generous estimate. Only those of us who were busy with other than aesthetic activities in the ’nineties can forget the excitement stirred up by the emergence of Mr. Huneker’s early books at about the time that America, under the chaperonage of

¹ *Steeplejack*. By James Gibbons Huneker. 2 vols. New York: Chas. Scribner’s Sons.

Mr. McKinley, was discovering its Manifest Destiny as an exponent of pious imperialism. The United States won the Spanish War and took on Manifest Destiny and the Philippines at about the same time that Mr. Huneker steered into port his dazzling, strange, and multicolored cargo of aesthetic ivory, apes, and peacocks. It was an authentically novel adventure for the home-keeping American reader of average intelligence and information to pick up a book by Huneker in the late 'nineties and find himself confronting a critic who was jauntily at his ease among all the fine arts known to man, and who bewildered God-fearing and "cultured" Americans, their minds going along comfortably with Hamilton Mabie and Charles Dudley Warner and Kenyon Cox and Ireneus Prime Stevenson and other illuminati of that ilk, by his casual indication of a *terra incognita* peopled by a strange race of poets, painters, music-makers, dramatists, novelists, philosophical rhapsodists, and an anonymous class impressively and with beguiling wickedness referred to by their exploiter as "anarchs," "immoralists," "melomaniacs," "iconoclasts," "visionaries," "egoists," "bedouins," and by other provocative appellations.

There were not many reading, play-going, picture-viewing, music-loving Americans at the beginning of this century who knew much about the artists who were then evolving new conceptions of color and design and sound, who were seeing man and his world with new eyes, and who were imperiously demanding of their generation fresh and unaccustomed and difficult prodigies of comprehension and appreciation. Mr. Huneker stood almost alone in America at that time as a persuasive advance agent for these new men and these unfamiliar concepts. While Hamilton Mabie and his confrères were still earnestly lecturing and essaying upon Thackery and Dickens, trying, a little uncertainly, to estimate George Meredith, and relapsing upon Mr. James Lane Allen with obvious relief, while their musical and dramatic and pictorial brothers of the critical craft were engrossed in Brahms and Tchaikovsky, Pinero and Clyde Fitch, Sargent and Abbey, Mr. Huneker gaily conducted to public pasture (as he himself once put it) his surprising "flock of Unicorns—typifying the dreamers of dreams in the Seven Arts,"—while he pro-

duced, with sustained and amazing virtuosity, a prose kaleidoscope of latter-day artists, novelists, poets, philosophers, composers, and a miscellaneous assortment of fantaisists, funambulists, madmen, mystics, and seers. For the first time, American readers felt themselves to be on familiar terms with such foreigners as Richard Strauss, Nietzsche, Flaubert, George Moore, Maeterlinck, Huysmans, Baudelaire, Stirner, De Gourmont, Rimbaud, Barrès, Picasso, Matisse, Laforgue, Wederkind, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Strindberg, Gauguin—some of them living innovators, some of them dead and enigmatic memories, but all of them remote from the experience of the average American ardently in pursuit of cultural sophistication.

And Mr. Huneker did more than import this alluring and exotic cargo. He took them about with him, made friends for them, put them up at the best clubs, found welcoming stables for his unicorns. In other words, he talked about them extremely well—with vividness, with charm, with evident affection and understanding, with a prose-style that was a new thing under the American sun: a flexible, flashing, audacious, richly communicative style, poetic and irreverent, witty and rhapsodical, swift and nervous, yet extraordinarily sumptuous and learned and ornate. It was uncompromisingly personal, pungent, racy, yet it was sophisticated to the last degree, immensely amusing and stimulating in its verbal virtuosity, its riotous gusto. To a public culture which had been timorous and parochial, a civilization which had been drab, anaemic and thin, Mr. Huneker, almost unaided, brought color and gayety and abundance.

He became at once, and always remained, the critical Playboy of the Arts. He bombarded the amazed American reader with new and startling affirmations; he was the rhapsodic celebrant of a hundred new aestheticisms; he beat the drum with vigor and eloquence, in season and out, for Strauss and Nietzsche and Blake and Flaubert, and a score of other esoteric and neglected geniuses and radical modernists in all the arts. He was the clairvoyant and eloquent interpreter of all those painters, tone-poets, novelists, essayists, philosophers, who were as yet unreceived in our intellectual society—and it is amazing to look back now, after a quarter-century, and remember how barren was that crude,

oppressed, and timid civilization of ours in the later 'nineties, how ready for just such an enlivenment as Mr. Huneker brought to it.

Into the depressing drabness of our critical writing, with its incomparable paltriness and sterility, its dullness and triteness, its traditionalism and vapidty, Mr. Huneker entered with somewhat the effect of a gusty spring wind blowing through a long-closed Middle-Western "parlor."

It is assuaging to realize that that rich and generous temperament, that fine-grained and responsive intelligence, that ample and hospitable spirit, had accomplished its fertilizing, its liberating, its provocative task. There are signs in this last book of his that the sources were running dry. There is much in Mr. Huneker's story of his adventures among people and emotions that the Huneker of a decade ago would have modified or suppressed—surprising trivialities, commonplaces, conformities; much that is inconsequential and trite, and sometimes a little cheap. He has not made engrossing or illuminating or significant his studying of law, his early adventures in criticism, his visits to the Pope and to Roosevelt, his reminiscences of forgotten worthies of the stage and the concert-hall, of the Philadelphia of the 'seventies and the New York of the 'eighties and 'nineties. And he had begun to repeat himself, to thresh over old straw. It was always a defect of his style that he fell in love with certain epithets, and that these hypnotized him, dogged the footsteps of his prose, tending to make it seem artificial and self-conscious. This tendency grew upon him, so that little of his later writing was new-minted, fresh, spontaneous. He was sometimes "intoxicated by the exuberance of his own verbosity," so that he seemed to be far more concerned with the rhythms and sonorities of his prose than with its effectiveness as an instrument of precise and full communication.

He had never cared to attempt any orientation of artistic phenomena in the social scheme—his criticism was always (in the admirable phrase of that wise and exquisite American seer, Edith Wyatt) "untouched by any of the moods of a profound general consciousness." One misses in him always a realization of the need for relating individual artistic appearances to their

contemporary human environment, to the great stream of general ideas and tendencies. His criticism is merely aesthetic diagnosis brilliantly and sympathetically performed in a vacuum, without any attempt to determine its human or spiritual values. No doubt he failed to discriminate between the criticism that is enriched by an acute awareness of all the interacting forces of its social setting, and the incurable American habit of discussing aesthetic phenomena in terms of a rigid and sentimental piety—the disastrous tendency which has brought into our critical writing those horrible things, the platform manner, the pulpit manner, the shield and helmet of the ethical policeman, the handcuffs of the lewd detective of the moral order. From these hideous perversions he naturally revolted with loathing. But he need not have detached himself so wholly from the deeper and wider implications of his subject-matter.

Yet, when all is said, how immeasurably valuable an influence he was! What susceptibility, clairvoyance, immediacy of response were his! He was innocent of prepossessions, infinitely flexible and generous. He was the friend of any talent fine and strange and courageous enough to incur the dislike of the mighty army of Bourbons, Puritans, and Boeotians. His critical tact was almost infallible. “Our myriad intuitions are the veiled queens who steer our course through life,” says a profound and subtle mystic of today, “though we have no words in which to speak of them.” But Mr. Huneker had words in which to speak of them. He has written pages that will always be cherished by those for whom criticism is one of the several ways of literature—pages of superb and gorgeous imagination, of beautiful insight, of splendid valor. He was, we have already said of him, both vivid and acute, robust and fine-fingered, tolerant yet unyielding, astringent yet tender—dynamic, contagious, perpetually lovable, inveterately alive. Remembering him, one remembers, too, one of his favorite quotations from Nietzsche: “Convictions are prisons. . . . New ears for new music. New eyes for the most remote things. . . . The pathos of distance.”

LAWRENCE GILMAN.